

... And the Lithuanian Example

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IN A STUNNING democratic surge, Lithuania's Communist-dominated parliament has now voted (243 to 1) to eliminate the claim of the Communist Party to single-party rule, making possible early multiparty elections. In a parallel nationalist surge, the Lithuanian republic's party is preparing to sever itself from the national party. Mr. Gorbachev had pleaded with the faithful not to take these steps, which lead, if unchecked, to a system of democracy in which the Communist Party has only the support it earns, and to the passage toward independence of a constituent republic.

What is Mr. Gorbachev going to do to halt these stunning unravelings of Communist authority and Great Russian dominance in the single-party multinational empire that is the Soviet Union? He had thought that a lighter hand, appeals to the common interest and large grants of cultural and economic autonomy would ease the Baltic ferment, and they might have, but for the example of Eastern Europe next door streaking into the future without visible Soviet hindrance. No longer does perestroika in the Soviet Union set the pace for a reluctant bloc. Now the hinterland provides the model—for the Soviet Union's Western-oriented Baltics and, to a degree, for the Great Russian heartland too.

The common reach for democracy and independence is the result of reforms that Mr. Gorbachev inaugurated and that in fact he must deepen if he is to bring his country successfully into the 21st century. Increasingly, the chances are that it won't be enough to try to muddle through and apply preemptive half-measures. Over the weekend, for instance, the Soviet leader, under pressure from a parliamentary faction that looks suspiciously like a second party, said that at some later stage it might be possible to alter the national Communist Party's constitutionally derived "leading role," but warned against any such formal move now.

Zbigniew Brzezinski argues in a Foreign Affairs article entitled "Post-Communist Nationalism" that if the Soviet Union is to move forward it has no choice but to modernize politically as well as economically. This means establishing the sort of new links with members of national and ethnic groups that they find consistent with their dignity as free people. The United States cannot back off in dismay about Mr. Gorbachev's embarrassment. It should support a broad Soviet reach for a whole new internal accord. This is a huge order and an essential one.